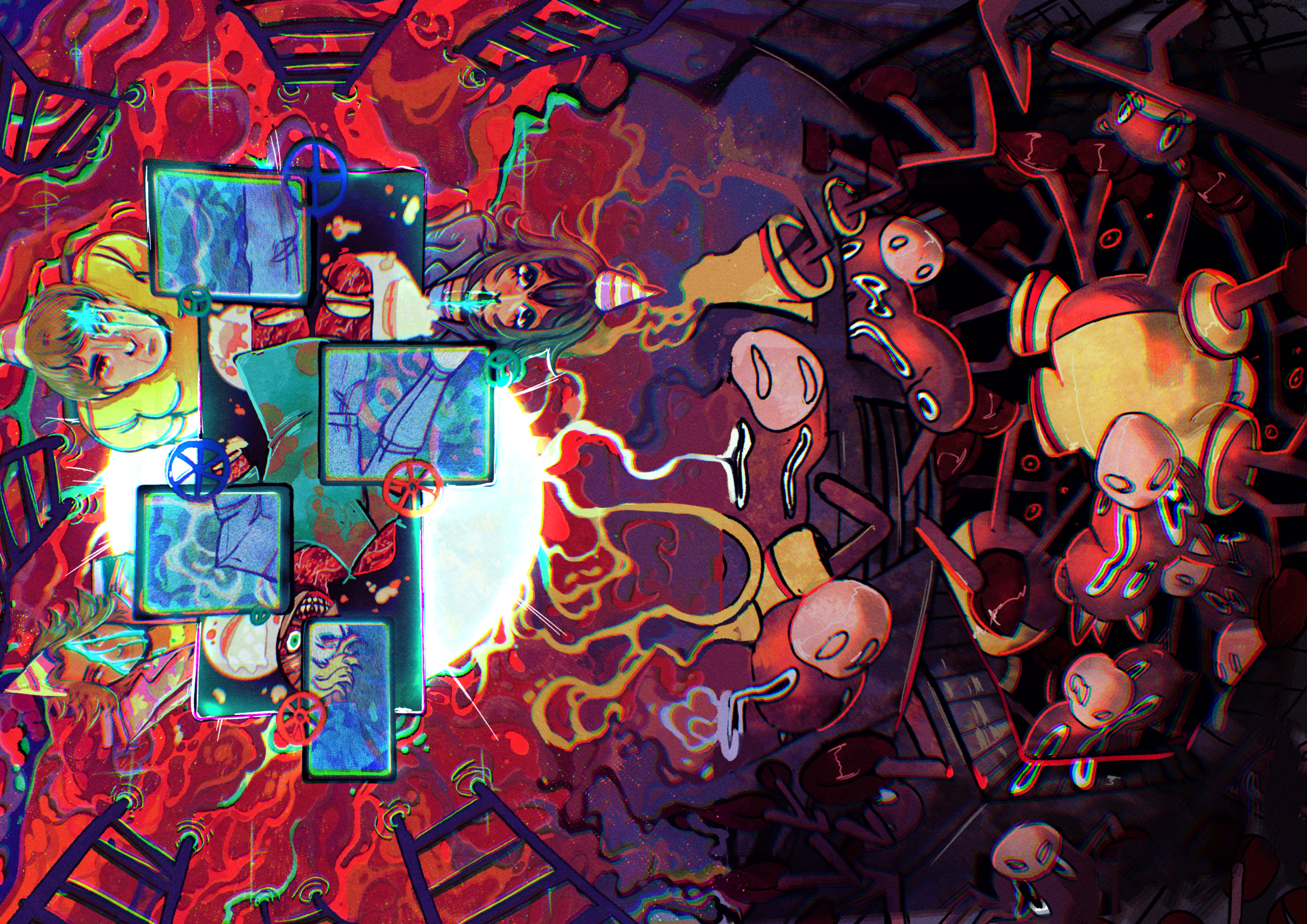
D.E.A.D. PIXEL

A Mouthwashing Fanzine



A NOTE FROM THE MODS

Thank you for downloading this zine!

We love Mouthwashing, and what better way to express that than gathering a group of talented writers and artists together to create a fanzine?

We hope you enjoy this journey through the stars and psychological horror. Special thanks goes to Wrong Organ for developing Mouthwashing, Sheldon for spurring the creation of this zine, and AKnightOfAGoodKing for keeping the ship running,

Please note that, like the game, this zine touches on a variety of sensitive topics including, but not limited to:
Gore, implied sexual assault, death, body horror, violence, psychological horror, misogyny, and cannibalism.

Reader discretion is advised.

DEAD PIXEL

MOUTHWASHING

I HOPE THIS HURTS

papernautilus says,
“ In the Back of My Mind, It’s Always There ”

Anya quickly learns that in the Pony Express, seniority is everything.

Even after all these long, cruel days, she still finds it horrifically humorless how much she'd once found herself looking up to Swansea, Curly, and Jimmy on her first voyage. She envied their effortless cool, the way their coveralls were so worn in you could tell where Swansea slid his wallet and keys into his pockets every day, and Jimmy's self-assured swagger that spoke wordlessly of stardust accumulated, miles traveled, and sleepless nights weathered. They spoke of old crewmembers with nicknames she could not decode with casual nonchalance, most fondly of all the mysterious “ol’ Ramirez” that she'd replaced as the ship’s medical officer.

As she found his messy handwriting all over old logs and shipment invoices, the cough drops he’d favored still left in the medical bay desk, she wondered what kind of man he'd been. From the way the crew spoke of him, he was eight feet tall and could cure a headache with a joke. She tried not to let it get to her, and threw herself headlong into studying for her medical exam, certain if she was simply industrious herself enough she would surely pass this time.

She had nothing but time to kill, after all.

Curly's golden hair was already threaded through with silver, though she wouldn't have placed him much older than his mid-thirties. He told her effusively that he wanted her to feel welcome and to please come to him with any concerns or suggestions with that megawatt open-door-policy smile she was certain earned him countless commendations.

During her orientation, she’d heard horror stories about crews that did not synergize: it was the entire reason her role was recently expanded to serve in a mental health capacity.

Back then, she believed with stalwart conviction she was doing a very good thing. She would help people, keep the crew content, and working well together. Everyone had a part to play in the Pony Express, after all.

She does not think about the fact she is the only woman aboard until halfway to the Plutonian Outpost. (Later, in those bloodsoaked hallways, she will curse her own naivety.)

Back then, it simply did not occur to her. She was entirely eclipsed by her newness to the *Tulpar*, her inexperience, her status as a green, untested Pony Express member and the lofty bars just out of her reach. Now she treats even the most minor of injuries with stoicism, and delivers her psych exams unflinchingly, no matter how sarcastic Jimmy’s responses.

Swansea’s biweekly psych exam goes as expected for the first thirty minutes. He methodically unwraps mints from her candy dish and litters her desk with the cellophane wrappers as he mechanically replies, “Yes, no, no, no, a very long time ago, none of your business—” and Anya dutifully writes down every response.

“And any—any feedback you would like to provide to the Pony Express medical team—?” She hesitates; it was an interjection of her own.

“As a matter of fact,” Swansea grunts, “you *can* have some feedback. I dunno if there’s some sort of sensor wand on that thing-a-ma-jiggy—” he waves aggressively to the medical scanner device, “—but I hope it can help you surgically remove the stick up your ass.”

Anya blinks, a slow flush of horror rising up her neck. “I’m sorry. What?”

“You move like a goddamned HR robot,” he sneers, “sent straight from corporate to *spy* on us.”

Anya drops the clipboard. “I-I just want to do a good job,” she says with complete sincerity. Her fingers tremble as she slides the cap back on her ink pen. “That’s all.”

“Ramirez didn’t mess with half this stuff, he just filled it all out for us. You know, he really got to *know* us—”

“I’m not Ramirez,” Anya finally snaps. It was the first time she’d responded to any comparison to her predecessor since coming aboard. “I just signed up six months ago, and I want to do a good job—sir,” she adds hastily.

“Yeah, and I’m *telling* you how to do it,” he grumbles. “You don’t even show up for game night. *Game night!* I don’t know if you’re afraid the guys will bite you or something, but you’re making it *weird*.”

She stews it over in her mind as she chews her Pony Express branded chicken noodle soup, the plasticky noodles dissolving into the thin broth. This time, when Jimmy, Curly, and Swansea clear the table of food and take out the neatly stacked board games, she stays. After all, she could always study on watch later.

Just be one of the boys, she assures herself. She hadn't felt like she *wasn't* one of the boys before. She'd thought she was keeping a respectable distance from the rest of the crew, staying professional in her role as the ship's nurse and hoarder of psychological secrets.

And the truth is, they have many decades' worth of spacefaring experience than she. Swansea has been on Pony Express cruises since before she'd been born. Curly and Jimmy seem friendly enough, but they can carry entire conversations with her in the room without ever once looking to her for input. She does not know her place in this strange world of interlocking piping and astronomical units.

"Settlers of Europa?" Curly suggests.

Swansea grunts. "If you cheat *again*—"

"I didn't cheat." Curly empties the contents of the box onto the formica table, dealing out hexagonal squares that represent satellites. "You just weren't paying attention."

Anya loses herself in the competition of the game, handily winning with her ten victory points and a slew of newly settled cities. Swansea mumbles somewhat about beginner's luck, and Curly claps her on the back as Jimmy pushes his accumulated structures until they fly across the board. Growing up, the winner always had to put away the game, so Anya pulls the empty box to her side of the table and starts picking up the little wooden pieces.

"Another game?" she offers to Jimmy, who had not moved from his seat. The lounge is awash in the violet haze of sunset, at once serene and unsettling. It would quickly fade into the serene sapphire of the night time screen, the one she likes the most.

She stares very hard at the golden sun disappearing into the pixelated waters as Jimmy says, with forced casualness, "So I heard you want to be a doctor."

"Jim," Curly cuts in, with an edge of warning that Anya does not heed.

"I do," she says, meeting his gaze readily. She knew sometimes the way he spoke was at odds with the words he was saying. One too many times she'd assumed him rude, and realized later he'd been telling a joke too quick-witted for her to catch. "I've been studying hard."

"You know what," Jimmy smiles, "I can actually say that you have."

She returns his smile with full sincerity, heedless to the way it does not reach those cold, narrowed eyes.

"So is this your first time taking that doctor test?"

"Oh, uh, no." Anya sheepishly shuffles the cards. "It's—uh—not my first time."

"Oh, not your first time?" His eyebrows raise into his fringe of stringy hair, and for the first time, Anya realizes he wasn't being kind. "How many times have you taken it?"

She casts her gaze to Curly. He doesn't meet her eyes, only glaring at Jimmy.

"Jim, you've had your fun," he cuts in.

Jimmy laughs. It's not a nice sound. "You only ever call me that when I'm in trouble."

"Leave the kid alone," Swansea grunts. "You weren't so great yourself before you joined, Jimbo. No one joins Pony Express because they're smart or got a better choice. Not anymore. To fuck-ups and failures!" He raises his mug of black coffee as if it were a toast.

Jimmy always crossed his arms during the psychological exams, his entire face shuttered to her as he gave her sparing details, sometimes throwing out comments about his insomnia (a Pony Express staple; even she isn't immune to it) or a troubled childhood he only vaguely refers to as *back then,* as if his life had been separated into Before and After his Pony Express commission—or Before and After meeting Curly.

Jimmy's hands spread wide on the chipped table, shoulders thrown back, chin tilted down; he reminds her of those old film reels of long extinct lions stalking a wounded gazelle before pouncing.

She scans the room desperately, searching for some life raft to cling to. Curly glares at Jimmy while Swansea clatters in the kitchen, stirring up another pot of burnt black coffee.

So Anya summons her courage and says, "I've taken it five times."

Jimmy cackles like it's the funniest joke he's heard all underway, and maybe it is. He doubles over, clutching his stomach, before flinging his head back and guffawing for such a measure of time that the sound grows strange and distorted, like he's sobbing.

Curly stomps over and slams his fist down on the table, scattering the leftover game pieces, a wooden settlement rolling off the table and underneath the wooden sideboard where they'd never find it again. "Knock it *off,*" he barks. "I'm speaking as your captain."

"Captain," Jimmy sneers. "God, it really has gone to your head, hasn't it?" And Anya realizes that this doesn't have anything at all to do with her and her five failed examinations; this argument has been going on long since before she'd ever even thought about enlisting, possibly since she was still in college.

It does not lessen the sting of humiliation that she has been dragged out as nothing more than a piece in their years-long tug-of-war.

"No. I'm not doing this with you," Curly huffs. He casts a beseeching look to Anya. "Thanks for coming out, really. We should all probably get to bed soon—"

"What," Jimmy drones, "don't want our newest enlistee to see the captain with his tail between his legs?"

"*You* are going to keep doing this until you get a reaction," Curly retorts, "and I won't give you the satisfaction. I know this game, Jimmy. I'm not playing it."

"You *could* dock his pay," Swansea grunts. "Insubordination. Hazing. I can think of a few good things to send to Corporate. And you've got two witnesses." He inclines his mug to Anya, who suddenly finds herself the object of Jimmy's scrutinizing glare.

"You'll rat on me, then?" he snorts. "Just like that?"

Curly snaps, "None of this is going to Corporate—"

Jimmy stands; several hexagonal pieces cartwheel off the table and land on the scrubby carpet. "So you are too chickenshit after all to take command of your co-pilot—"

She'd always thought it would be Jimmy who would resort to violence first; it seemed a fluent enough language to him. Perhaps Swansea, who already had somewhat cauliflowered ears from a lifetime ago of beatings, yellowing sclera suggesting long-term liver disease. He'd been frank about his sobriety, flicking his Alcoholics Anonymous coins onto her desk for her perusal. It is one of the things she admired most about the Chief of Engineering.

But everyone has their limits.

She never thought she'd see Curly reach his first.

Curly snatches Jimmy's half-drunk Pony Express mug and flings it across the room.

It collides with the cerulean nightscreen in an explosion of brown liquid; Swansea groans as it seeps down the screen, entirely ruining the illusion of a serene waterscape.

"I'm sorry," falls immediately out of Curly's mouth, looking frantically to Swansea and Anya. "I—I shouldn't have—"

"Only thing you have to be sorry about is giving Jimmy exactly what he wanted—a reaction," Swansea grunts. "Anya, be a dear and go grab that ladder down the stairwell so we can get this mess cleaned up."

"I'm so sorry," Curly repeats, shaken and staring at his splayed calloused hands in his lap as if he still could not believe he'd been capable of such a show of violence. "If—If you need to report this—if you need to talk to Corporate—"

Anya lays a hand on his shoulder. "It's quite alright," she reassures him sincerely. "It's been a long time underway, after all."

His startlingly blue eyes gaze up at her in trembling relief, framed by purpled hollows beneath his eyes, bloodshot starbursts staining his white sclera pink.

"You should get some sleep," she suggests softly. "I'm more than happy to prescribe you something, Captain."

Curly's Adam's apple rolls as he swallows. "I might take you up on that," he says, and then he summons up a half-hearted smile. "Great game, Anya."

"Orion," Jimmy drawls from the half-opened airtight door, glancing over his shoulder. "We've got maintenance to do."

That old tension settles into Curly once again as he stands and follows his friend. They disappear down into the cockpit, their voices indecipherable beneath the hum of the ventilation. Swansea finds a metal bucket, a sponge, and some soap, and coaxes Anya up the ladder as his "knees don't work too good anymore."

As she scrubs burnt coffee off the screen, as if flowering beneath her fingertips, she sees it for the very first time. This close to the screen she can make out the individual units of color: neon green, red, and blue. It is no more than the size of a grain of rice. She presses the pad of her finger against the soft plex, as if she could burnish it out like a scratch. It is immutable, a single square of oblivion so stark she could not believe she was the only person who ever noticed it for years.

It will become her ever-present companion until the final days of her life:

A single dead pixel.

@AESTHELYA ON IG

5 YEARS BEFORE THE CRASH

HEY, JIM.

OH, HEY.

YOU TOOK YOUR TIME.

SORRY.

HOW DID YOUR INTERVIEW GO?

SHIT.

"WE'LL CALL YOU" AND ALL THAT BOLLOCKS.

I'M NOT EVEN GOOD FOR OPENING LETTER BOMBS, I GUESS

I'M SURE YOU'LL FIND SOMETHING, JIMMY.

ON ANOTHER NOTE, I... I GOT THE PROMOTION.

OOOH, LEMME SEE!

"CAPTAIN CARLING"... HAS A RING TO IT.

AH...

HUH. NICE RAISE, TOO.

YEAH.

TOUCH!

...

...

JESUS, WILL YOU STOP THAT?!

I CAN'T HANDLE YOU BEING THIS OVERJOYED!!

Sorry! I KNOW IT'S STUPID!

I WANTED THIS.

I SHOULD BE HAPPY.

I DON'T KNOW WHY...

WH SHH

HEY.

I GOT US BURGERS ON THE WAY HOME.

WANNA HAVE SOME AND WATCH 'THE FIFTH ELEMENT', CAPTAIN?

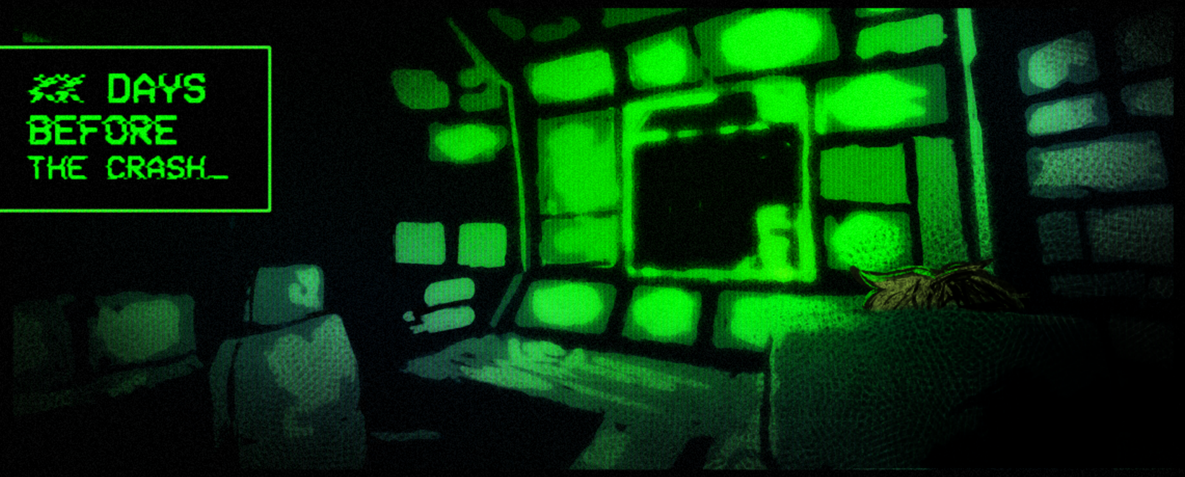
YEAH... THAT SOUNDS BRILLIANT.

THANK YOU, JIMMY.

PAT PAT

DAISUKE PAPER DOLL

by Nadechi


XX DAYS
BEFORE
THE CRASH_

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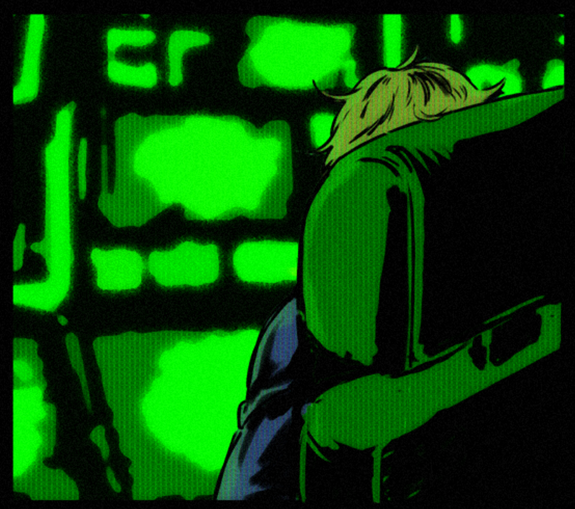

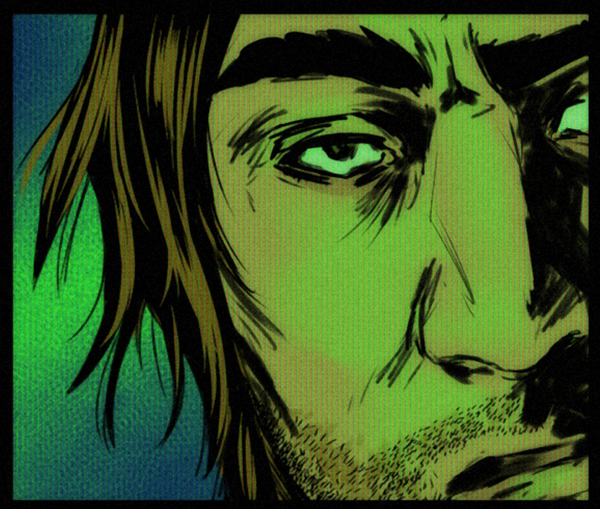

HEY
TIME TO
WAKE
UP
SLEEPY-
HEAD!
AH!!

Jimmy!
You almost gave me a heart attack!

Yeah, yeah. Slacking off, aren't we?
You really need to get more sleep, man.
Honestly...

Some captain you are.

Truly setting an example, huh?
Ha! You can be such an asshole sometimes, you know?

Luckily for you, it was just me.
Imagine if it had been Swansea, or the nurse.
That would have been very embarrassing for you. Haha. What would you do without me?
...?
Ah.

Yeah! Haha.

PONY

SATURNO says,
“ Do Captains Dream of Electric Ships ”

Sitting in the uncomfortable captain's seat of the *Tulpar*, Curly feels like he's five years old again. It's a nerve that occasionally twitches, a muscle that tenses and pulls him by the hair back to a time when he was a kid; a silent childhood room, the fear that the "lights out" of the night signifies the unnoticed presence of danger, the absence of his parents, the complete disappearance of safety. A door wide open, allowing entry of...who?

Fear, of course. *Him.*

Curly stretches his fingers forward, and the cheap plastic of the chair's armrests manages to reassure him. Alone in the cockpit, he glances over his shoulder to make sure the door remains closed.

But nothing stays closed in this place. I have to bolt it. But why? I'm alone. This is stupid. It's nonsense. Nothing more than my fear talking.

Who?

He's left *it* behind—Earth. He's left *it* behind—boyhood. And yet, like an old friend, he's dug his nails into his hand to follow Him wherever He goes. A parasite stuck in the pit of Curly’s stomach, trapped inside a larger beast, far...so far from solid ground. So, when he raises his hand and sees the sweat glistening on his palm, beneath the emerald lights of the screen, understanding swallows him up.

You're part of something bigger now.

Bigger than himself.

He activates autopilot, leaving the cockpit. Outside, the warmth and humidity make him think of some ventilation failure, but it's not his job to fix it. If only autopilot also involved those kinds of resolutions. Healing its own wounds.

Autopilot is the *Tulpar*'s fight-or-flight reflex, lost in the distracted singing that emanates. That hum. Curly has heard it ad nauseam, and suspects his brain has been able to transform it into a kind of lullaby. A mother without maternal instinct. The weakness of thinking machines is that they blindly believe all the information they receive, and act accordingly. If an object, an unidentified planet, a lost satellite, meteorite fragments, crosses their path, *she* will do whatever is necessary to save *herself*, and they...

The same. We are the same. We have merged into a single thing. Where do you begin, and where does this ship end?

He hesitates for only a second at the top of the stairs...and, after a gasp, descends.

The heat is unbearable, and the narrowness of the descent, the darkness, makes it worse. How could the ducts have become so clogged? He raises his face, continuing to descend, and the darkness is almost total. The lights are barely able to illuminate *anything*, and what stands out most is the sheen of humidity on those dark walls, ever closer and closer with each step.

Immersed in so much darkness, he feels small, almost invisible. It's like the first time he sat behind the controls of a spaceship, and he remembers it perfectly. How old was he at the time? Almost thirty.

When a ship is taking off, there's a split second during which all the cockpit lights suddenly go out. Just a second, or even less. It lasts as long as the blink of an eye, so it's easy to miss. He's noticed that detail many times, and each time he's consumed by that darkness, it seems to last for years. Centuries lost in the darkness, trapped...devoured, almost. There's no light, yes, but there's no sound either, and then...everything suddenly comes back to life, with an unbearable force.

By the time he's able to reach the top of the stairs, the darkness and humidity are such that he can barely manage the titanic act of breathing.

He leans forward. Takes two steps. His right shoulder brushes the wall in the darkness, the fabric swelling with moisture and *something*, perhaps part of the wall's own material, sticking to his uniform and forcing him to jerk his shoulder forward, slamming headlong into the hallway opening. That something has sunk its teeth into the fabric and pulled back, forcing part of the material to give way and exposing the skin of his shoulder.

“What?”

He stretches out his hands and gropes the darkness, advancing at a snail's pace. His knuckles caress the warm air until he feels the hallway walls drawing closer and closer together. So much so that, blindly, he realizes he'll only be able to walk and move down the hallway sideways, through an opening barely thick enough to allow the Captain mobility.

“Anya?!”

The slowly blinking red lights don't illuminate. They just hurt the eyes. Unable to make out anything in the corridor beyond the walls pressing against his chest and back, he moves sideways as fast as he can, but everything in there is worse. It smells worse. The air is barely circulating.

“Can anyone hear me? Swansea? Jimmy?!”

A terrible ventilation failure? An accident? But he couldn't feel any kind of crash... Besides, the alarm should have gone off. No, this is something different. Worse than anything they've ever experienced before.

The walls *sweat* and close in on him, almost desperate to keep him in place. The moment he feels he's reached the end of the corridor, a new fork appears to the right or left, further losing him in a darkness that seems endless. He's grown weary of calling names, quickly realizing that, wherever he is and no matter what happened, he's alone. With each tremulous gasp that escapes his lips, with each tremble as his right hand, the one moving forward, hits the damp wall marking a new fork, he understands more and more: he's alone...and He'll arrive at any moment.

He's probably already there.

Peering down from above, licking his lips. The *Tulpar*'s lights no longer illuminate anything, a tired and wounded beast. Furious. She's trying to kill him, it's a fact. Perhaps the lack of oxygen has caused him to lose his mind, but when his body is thrown to the side and rolls, when his nostrils fill with the stench of dampness, confinement, and heat—when he looks up, completely drenched in sweat, and sees, once again, the cockpit door standing before him, he realizes he's lost. Yes...

Completely devoured.

There's nothing behind him (only darkness, heavy, sticky), and in front, the door is all that exists. He waits, and without needing to come closer, the metal slides open with the whisper of a dull knife, leaving the remains of the beast's exhalation stuck to the thick gray frame.

He moves forward. Something must have broken inside the man, but isn't this what he's always wanted? Ships and space. Absolute emptiness. Silence. His heavy boots echo, almost like a creak, as the door slides on its own again, closing with a thud.

There's nothing there, nothing but the static screens on a red background, no flickering, no warning sirens, no red text announcing which of the many glitches is developing. Everything has gone straight to hell...or, worse yet: to a tortuous limbo. Stuck between day and night, never fully reaching either. The wait can be worse than death.

“Curly?”

That voice. He stares at the radio, which only works once the heavy, metallic beast passes through the atmosphere (any atmosphere). It pops, tickles the air. The radio's light flickers, again, red. It's never been turned on with that color before. It's not set to that. He doesn't move.

“Curly...Do you really believe that there was nothing you could have done? Do you cling to that comfort?”

A pop, but he recognizes that voice. Through the foam of interference, it emerges like a pearl from a shell. It sighs, a song of dismay he's heard many times in the medical room.

“You delivered us...into his hands. Now, now...don't run from this. Let it devour you. It's only right. Here it comes.”

A lilting laugh preludes the blare of a hundred alarms, sending the *Tulpar* lurching forward. The Captain falls to the dashboard, the metal burning beneath his chest, the cockpit's oxygen giving way only to the whisper of a liquid that, in furious torrents, seems to seep directly from the floor, slowly but surely soaking the soles of his boots and, little by little, rising.

Every time the lights flicker, he's sucked into complete darkness, and when they return, his entire world is submerged in blood. He's unable to discern what it is that slowly rises. Water? Oil? Or perhaps worse. He stumbles back to the right, and once he tries to struggle with the door, he realizes it's locked tight. He won't budge an inch. The cockpit has become his coffin.

“Weren't you tired of your life being something you have to run away from all the time?”

The voice that emerges, bathed in static, from the radio, no longer sounds as much like Anya's voice. It's a shapeless mix, four different tones. He's unable to guess where one begins and the other ends. She screams, but her voice doesn't sound a bit above the blare of the sirens. Beyond the rectangular, thick-glass window, she can only glimpse sporadic reddish-brown glimpses of the corridor, which, like the interior of the cockpit, is filling with that dark, sticky, warm liquid.

“Look on the bright side. At least you won't be able to run away from your death.”

“H-Help!”

Uselessly, he peppers the thick surface of the metal door with blows, throws

desperate punches against the glass, without creating a single crack. With the dampness now above his waist, his flesh burns and his heart twists in an agony he could never reproduce because, do words to explain that kind of suffering exist? Not just for pain, but for terror. It's not something you can share. It's not something you can survive.

“HELP!”

The hallway blinks, again, like an immense eye. Black. Red. Black. Red.

And he sees, finally, a figure approaching, emerging from the darkness.

It moves at a snail's pace toward the door, echoing with the knocking it delivers. He screams, though he can't put a name to the silhouette. Not until it stops on the other side of the door, patient.

Black.

He can't discern anything, and then...

Red.

There it is, standing on the other side of the glass, a pathetic breath away. He contemplates, acknowledges, and his hands fall to either side of his body like a pair of dead weights, sinking into the liquid.

On the other side of the glass, he returns his gaze to himself. Calmer, even smiling. On the other side of the glass, in the hallway, Curly slowly shakes his head. No, of course not. After an eternity fleeing away from his life, it's only fair...

The liquid bubbles, having reached his neck. It rises, slowly, above his lips. Submerges his nose.

...Yes, it's only fair. It's all he deserves.

It rises above the crown of his head, and he sinks completely. Immersed in the liquid, the lights continue this trance. They turn on. They go out. The roar that surrounds him is no longer sirens, however, but a gentle pulse.

The heartbeat of a dying metal beast.

Talk

A Mouthwashing Comic

By El Hufbauer

PONY EXPRESS

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JIMMY!!

Give Curly his Medicine

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY
RESPONSIBILITY
RESPONSIBILITY

Myst says, “ Swan Song ”

Clank-clank-clank—boots stomp down the Utility corridor, reminding him of what hangovers used to feel like. Nails hammered into a hammered skull. Eyes bursting with sunlight, blinding him out of what passed for migraine-ridden sleep. A burning stomach filled with instant noodles, soon to be retched along with his painkillers. God, what Swansea wouldn’t do to be back there right now.

What he wouldn’t do for a *shot* right now.

Make it ten.

“Hey, chief!” It’s the kid, Daisuke. “Um…care to lend us a hand? Jim—I mean, the *Captain*—thought we could try to dig out the cupboards over at the lounge and see if there’s some more ingredients left under the foam. Or…something useful. Maybe?”

The crash ain’t changed him a little bit. He’s still too young, intent on staying optimistic and cheerful—a bit apologetic, but more like he’s been caught smoking in the bathroom when he should be in class, less like his boss went space-postal, trapping ‘em on some rock with no prospect of getting out.

“Useful?” Swansea groans. “You ain’t done anything useful in your life. This goddamn stuff,” he gestures toward the foamed-up cracks in the parts, toward the locked door to Utility, “keeps on coming.”

“Uh…so you’re still working on Utility, right?”

Daisuke scratches the back of his head. He sounds a little hopeful…and young. So young.

Goddammit.

Swansea takes a long, deep breath. He harrumphs, then gives his toolkit a kick. “Alright. Knock yourself out.” At that, Daisuke lights up. “The axe’s stayin’ here, though, or you’ll end up chopping your own head off.”

“Oh! Thanks, man!” Daisuke beams, completely ignoring Swansea’s glare…and off he goes.

Once the kid’s turned around the corner, Swansea feels his chest decompress.

He’s gonna guard the secret behind this door with the rest of his life; he knows. Keeping a watchful eye on the self-proclaimed Captain, the man with a plan—making up braindead problems to find their braindead solutions, but at least he keeps the kid busy. All Anya’s doing anymore is keep her grim vigil by Curly, unable to stomach stuffing him with painkillers, unable to stop. Swansea’s given her a hand with it a couple times, too. It wasn’t pretty.

Come the moment, though, she is bound to agree. She is bound to agree that neither Curly, nor Jimmy, nor Anya herself, have the right to ever get outta here. No, none of them does, least of all Swansea.

When you think about it. When you really think about it, looking at the bigger picture—at the bunch of losers caught in this can. This could be a macabre newspaper strip like the ones gramps used to read: making time waiting to starve in the *Tulpar*’s entrails. No clockin’ out of *this* dead end job.

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This *goddamn fly* hasn’t stopped pestering him in an hour. Swansea feels like a horse, huge and patient, shaking it off as the sweat grows under his pits. Seems like every summer just keeps throwing them more, increasingly eerie, winged beasts.

His kid Hooper is hell-bent on squashing them with a well-aimed shoe throw. Then Swansea intercepts the missile with his head. “Goddammit!” he shouts, while Hooper melts in a fit of giggles. “Take out your brother and go play in the yard!”

They do as they’re told, though. They’re good boys—Hooper eight, Wren six.

Maybe a younger, healthier version of himself would be outside with them, running and playing spaceships and dino-bots or whatever. His back’s killing him, though—right along with his job. He’s still getting acclimated to Earth after the last long haul, each mission making him a bit older, a bit angrier.

Worst of all is Paloma’s silence. She watches the kids from the window, smoking, her face warm but alert. Pissed off at him, of course. Swansea keeps missing things while away. Wren’s soccer matches; Odie’s first day of school. And when he’s not in the can, but with his feet on Earth, he’s too tired to even *live* through the milestones he’s supposed to enjoy—he’s there, sure, but not *all* there.

Then there’s talks and silences, about the conditions getting worse, about the next mortgage pays, about autopilots, Pony Express behaving as if they were doing the crew a damn favor by not giving them the boot. *Rise and shine!*, Polle says. The implied part is, *or else!*

Eh. As long as his kids got some food and a decent pair of shoes to wear.

“Papa!”

It’s Odie, waddling from the couch. Rising and shining. Odie’s short for Odette—
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Paloma's choice—and she's clutching a goddamn Polle keyring (Pony Express sure need no excuses to dock their bonus, but they sure enjoy swamping him in all this crap).

Odie slaps the horse against the couch table, and Swansea has to reign in a snort. "Big or small...big or small..."

"Hey, birdie. Don't sing that, come on, give Papa a break." Swansea tries to wave her away, but—dammit, he can feel Paloma's eyes on him. Neither angry, nor disappointed. Just wondering who the hell is this guy. "Alright, alright. Let's do the pony ride..."

He takes Odie in his arms, pushes through the pain in his joints. He swoops her up, raising her high, then throwing her up in the air. "Big or small," he sings, his voice hoarse enough to fuck up every note of the tune, and Odie giggles in delight. "Pony Express carries it all!"

"Again!"

"Big or small..." That rips a chuckle from Swansea as well.

That fucking tune seems to have accompanied him ever since Hooper was a baby—Paloma's beaky nose and Swansea's blue eyes—so small, so defenseless, so tiny in the crook of his arm. How could they? How could they throw this little, living, breathing person into this mess of a world? All Swansea wants is for Odie, and the boys, to get older, so that he can tell them—live a fucking awesome life, live from one day to the next, do whatever the fuck you want, go crazy. *Don't be like Papa. Don't hear the fucking horse.*

Yet even back then, cradling his newborn son to sleep, the only song that came to mind was the Pony Express tune.

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"An intern?"

Can't be. They barely got a week 'til the haul.

Swansea looks up from the exposed entrails of the *Tulpar*, from the instruments laid out to measure her pulse. Curly is handing him a report, and Swansea scowls, takes it with dark oil-stained fingers. *Compliance with new crewmember regulations... necessary quotas*...this would be the perfect moment for canned laughter to ring out, the shitty sitcom this is.

Swansea regards the boy. He looks like a teeny idol taken straight from a poster on Odie's wall. He must be about as old as Wren, school just finished—looks too young for the *Tulpar*, too clean. Too well-loved.

"Hi! I'm Daisuke!" He smiles a Colgate smile.

Swansea grunts his disapproval, turns his shoulder on Curly. "Very funny, Capitano. Now get his ass back to the cradle, some of us have work to do here."

Canned laughter. "Uh oh." Daisuke faces away. "I think the big guy doesn't like me much." *More canned laughter, building up to a cheer.* "Geez, come on! If I don't get in, my mum will be livid! I'm totally good at, uh...screwing motors and such."

Ugh, the worst part is that he will fit right in with the rest of these idiots. That the crew will do their best to keep him, and the *Tulpar* will wear him out, until all that's left is the outline of a person, a commercial. *No—save yourself,* that's what Swansea wants to say. *Get out of here, out of this sad show.*

"You're talkin' like I've got a say in it, kiddo," Swansea says without lifting his eyes off work.

"Which you don't?"

"Obviously." *The audience ooo's, egging on a confrontation.* "But take a look at yourself, think about this twice. It ain't for you."

"Come on, cut the boy some slack. You came from somewhere, too." It's Jimbo, aka Bootleg Curly, his arms crossed, his hair greasy. *He's so unfunny that even the laugh track don't want him.* "You got a helping hand, he gets a good reference. No harm done."

No harm done.

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An axe cuts into the crimson sunset, voices and laughter and the Pony Express song distorted, the screen cracking through.

No harm done!

Screen shattered, static flickering. Red beacons of light bathe the room, though when he closes his ears he can still see that sunset far and wide. Finally! The outside matches what's inside! At least, like this, decaying and forgotten and broken all over, drunk on mouthwash and drowning in foam, the place's at its most honest! *Canned laughter, echoing in his ears way after the power has gone out*—ain't that the way we all feel, inside, all the goddamn time?

Ain't it, Anya—that's it!

At least it's ***honest!***

He laughs and he laughs and he's drunk and he's young and he's pissed off again.

It's now that he realises he's been here before, not the place but the feeling: Wake Rock, from the beginning to the end of his life, thirty-plus years gone in the blink of an eye—Paloma, the dog, the kids—no, no, no, that's taboo, he won't think about the kids, he won't look at the little swan in his pocket lest the realization actually hit him that he's not coming back not seeing them again not today not ever—

—all of that has been ***nothing***!

Rise and shine. He has not been more awake his entire fucking life!

"Big or small…big or small!"

He smashes the axe once more into the screen, shatters of glass leaving small red dots in their wake—Polle with its beady eyes like one of those 50s cartoons, almost as if it were scared—"Don't Be Daft!"—Polle decapitated but still grinning as if it knows, as if it fucking *knows*—

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It's been two months. Sixty-six days and counting.

Well, it's Anya who's counting, striking the days away on some tabletop calendar with "Pony Express" printed on top. Each day a little hungrier, a little angrier.

The soundtrack of their lives is as follows:

whimpering when Curly's painkillers wear off (the sound that shakes them awake in the mornings); soft snoring from Daisuke's bunk well into midday; sobs in the corridors leading to Medical, when Anya thinks they're all asleep; the only music you can play in this ship—dull, repetitive, elevator music or the Polletune; *canned laughter—ringing in the background—ooh, the wacky trouble they've gotten themselves into!* and whenever, whatever, the angry toppling of objects, of Jimmy's feet against the metallic corridors, kicking the thing that's keeping 'im alive, real smart there, Jimbo boy,

Rinse, repeat. It's one of these pretend-nights, unable to get some shut-eye and fed up from trying, that Swansea sighs and gets up and follows the trail of sound. Agitated gusts of breath lead him toward the cockpit like breadcrumbs. *Breadcrumbs*?

That's where he finds Anya. 'Course. Isolated. Where she can hear no one, Swansea guesses, where the *Tulpar*'s thrumming can drown out the sound of her own thoughts. She has sat down, made herself small and sad, forehead rested on the knees, and deep down, deep down, Swansea feels a stir of something like pity.

The door slides aside, draws her attention. Swansea grunts his hello.

It is her who eventually breaks the silence. "Utility…is it…" She swallows. "Is it really full of foam?"

The question strikes Swansea like a blow. Swansea tilts, he tumbles like a drunk. Around them, the *Tulpar* holds its breath.

Axe safe in one hand, he reaches for his own nape with the other, the muscles strained from sixty-six days of tension. His face's burning. He can lie straight to Jimmy's face, that's no problem. But the nurse…

"I can explain," Swansea says, his voice a low, hoarse rumble. And she? Silent like the dead. "Cleaned up plenty of that stuff already, 's all I mean. I wanted to check if the pods…"

Can't say anything she ain't figured out on her own, probably.

"They must be in use, then. Are they?" Anya's eyes glint with the dim emergency light, tears caught in her lashes. "Otherwise…you wouldn't…"

The axe falls to the floor. *Clunk*. So does he, the *Tulpar* warm against his aching back.

"One." He coughs it out, despite himself. "One. But not for us. You gotta understand."

She knows it's the right call. He sees it in her face, the hope draining slowly, and hey, it ain't that bad, ain't that bad if you don't think about it. "You know it's only right. If any of us deserves another shot at…" A turned jaw. "It's certainly not Jimbo. All hell would break loose if he knew, I can tell you that."

Anya closes her eyes, breathes deep until her shoulders are shaking. "Jimmy is…"

For a moment, it appears as though this is the last she will say. But she tilts; they both do. And she retches it all up, what she's been through—lets it all out like vomit.

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Not a good idea, breaking into cargo.

Maybe the best they've ever had.

'Cause he can try to get his thoughts away from Odie, her brothers, his wife. Maybe even indulge Jimbo's delusions that anybody's looking for them. *Canned laughter.* Yeah, yeah. If that and the damned Pony Express tune be the last thing echoing in his empty skull.

What he can't shake off, though. Not since Anya talked to him…

The thought that, hunger as they might, she's starting to seem bloated. Like there's

a bit of belly showing under her uniform, not like he's one to talk—*canned laughter*—the point is—

Swansea counts the days on the tabletop calendar.

And counts them again.

And then, one day while walking those corridors for the umpteenth time, after emptying his pockets and accidentally dropping the keyring—thinkin' of his kids—of the ***kid***—

Good Lord, ain't this the build-up for a joke, perfectly cynical. Imagine not even being lured into the *Tulpar*'s entrails, like this poor bastard Daisuke was. Imagine being born into it, with no hope.

No matter who gets the pod, Daisuke or Anya...it's death. It's guilt and shit and nothing but a tragedy all the same, his last act of piety, his swan song.

The jammed door to cargo slides aside, revealing shelves upon shelves, crates upon crates. *Dragonbreath: All Day Fire Fresh! Big or small, turns out that Pony Express really can ship it all! The Tulpar will give you anything you wish for, anything.*

The studio audience claps and cheers. No, it's him, it's Swansea, laughing out of his mind as the crew looks on in disbelief. The punchline, in fact, was hilarious; this has gone all the way around and become awesome again. He cannot wait for the others to get the joke!

every dead crewmate

is another pill i have to swallow

@eggtraoli

PONY
EXPRESS

PONY
EXPRESS

Starry says,
“ Monitoring You (Like Machines Do) ”

Sparks and trailing wires drip out of the overhead vent in Utility, the opening to the grate still swung open from where he tried to fix it months ago and drowned in foam. Daisuke and Jimmy look up at it; one with disdain, and the other with a worried brow.

“Whoa. Check out those sparks. I hate to imagine how gnarly it looks on the inside.” Daisuke shakes his head, ducking to avoid a particularly bright spark. He knows they’ll definitely hurt if they even brush against his skin, remembering Swansea’s sharp remark about not getting anywhere near it.

“You could make it through,” Jimmy says, looking directly at Daisuke. “We need to try it.”

Daisuke hesitates. He knows the important part of this entire journey is getting to Anya, especially if the vent’s the only other way in, but...but Swansea had *told* him, explicitly told him, to not go into it.

“Swansea said it’s not safe. I know he forgot to tell us about the pod, but he knows, like, everything about this kind of stuff.” Daisuke rambles, starting to feel bad about getting his boss—father figure—drunk and passed out on the ground. “Maybe we should just wait for him to wake back up...”

“You said you could handle it,” Jimmy says, starting to look annoyed. “Swansea taught you well, right? Time to prove it. He’ll be impressed when he wakes up. Proud. He’ll understand why we had to do this. Then he can explain himself.”

He sounds so genuinely confident that Daisuke believes he can make the journey. He *knows* Swansea is going to be upset that he crawled in the vents, even knowing that they’re badly-damaged and not functional, but this is for the greater good! It’s to check on a teammate, and isn’t that what everyone on the *Tulpar* is doing anyways? Isn’t it their responsibility to check in on each other?

“You think so?” Daisuke asks quietly, wringing his hands together. He doesn’t exactly have many people left on this trip; with Curly out of commission, Anya cracking under the pressure, and Swansea passed out right now...maybe he can end up on good terms with Jimmy.

“Daisuke. Everyone’s counting on you.” Jimmy pressures, glancing up at the vent. It’s enough of a reminder that Daisuke nods, clenching his fists. “Y-Yeah! I got this! Okay... here we go.”

Daisuke does his best to avoid the exposed wires, using the ladder to hoist himself into the vent. He makes his way upwards and starts pushing himself through the tight enclosed space. He has to duck and try to avoid a few sparks that bounce harmlessly off his clothes, but hisses through his teeth when he gets a few slices from some jagged metal he hadn’t noticed in the vent.

It’s not the furthest crawl to Medical, but there’s enough of a space that starts sloping down that Daisuke has to be careful when going down the vent. He remembers that when the end of the vent hits bottom, he’ll have to go up to push open the vent door to Medical.

When he hits the end of the slope, Daisuke doesn’t notice the live wire next to him since it’s blending into the darkness of the vent. He’s on a direct path to try and climb the vent, but one wrong move due to his sweaty palms sends him directly into the wire.

The lights go out, and Daisuke *screams*.

His muscles spasm as the sensation of fire roars through his veins. He feels every single part of his body vibrating and an incredibly strong current course through his bones. It’s a burning feeling, adrenaline starting to spike rapidly, and it feels like a hammer crashed directly into his fucking chest.

He jerks so hard he loses grip on the side, sliding and crashing down into the broken part of the vent. Sharp and jagged pieces of metal slice into his skin when he crashes into the bottom, desperately trying to catch his breath as the tip of a large shard cuts directly into his chest.

Swansea had already said the vent was unstable. Daisuke, still holding out a little bit of hope that he’ll be okay, is unprepared when chunks of sharp metal rain down and slice into his body, making him sink lower onto the main piece of metal. He feels warmth pierce his side and chest, making him scream again as he tries clutching at the huge gash.

He’s burning on the fucking sun. He’s aflame, and his blood spilling out is making the vents even worse to crawl through as he slips and slides again, but he has to press on. To check on Anya, to make Swansea proud, to ensure that Jimmy’s words will ring true for the first time this whole trip.

His vision fades in and out as he tries to stand, gasping in pain when he reaches up to grasp the sides and push through. He has to agonizingly hoist himself up, tears burning and fingertips barely feeling the sharp jagged edges of steel, and reaches the top completely destroyed.

With a final attempt, Daisuke shoves open the broken vent door and hoists himself inside.

It takes a few moments for Daisuke's vision to white out from the effort it took to go through the vent and come back again. When it clears for a moment, he can see two figures in the same places they're both usually in. Curly's still laying down in his bed, and Anya...

"Anya...?" Daisuke pants out, pressing a hand to his bloodied side. "...What did you do?"

Anya looks far too still for any movement to be detected from where she's laying against Curly's bed and table. Daisuke ignores the agonizing pain and numbness that's starting to trickle into his fingertips, forcing himself to stare at the situation that he's intruded on while his lifeforce bleeds onto the floor.

A bottle of pills sits in Anya's right hand, a few remaining painkillers abandoned on the bloodied floor. Daisuke can barely handle staring at Anya's vacant eyes, the blood coating her mouth, and the way her left hand cradles her stomach. Her decision is still relatively recent, since the blood's brighter than the rusted shade on Curly's bandages.

Speaking of their decommissioned captain, Daisuke whips around expecting the worst. There was always the possibility that Anya could've finally ended his suffering. After all this time, working tirelessly to make sure that Curly could take his medication and live to see another day. She could've gotten tired, sick of the man that stranded them there in space, doomed to live out a life of bland tasting food until their oxygen ran out.

To his shock and horror, *Curly's still alive.*

Anya made a choice for the both of them. Judging by the rapidly blinking eye, and Curly straining to both look away and stare directly at his friend and employee, it was not one that he wanted. Daisuke feels like he can barely breathe; they took too long. Making the cocktail, drugging Swansea, the climb through the vent...

"OPEN THE DOOR!" Jimmy shouts from the other side of the door, banging on the entryway. "GODDAMN IT, DAISUKE! WHAT HAPPENED TO CURLY? IS HE EVEN STILL BREATHING? OPEN THE DOOR!"

(Daisuke faintly notes that Jimmy didn't even ask about Anya.)

He heaves himself to the door, sliding open the lock and gasping as his stomach drops out from under him. Jimmy practically shoves the door open and rushes to Curly, standing over him with *something* in his eyes.

Anya's lifeless eyes stay staring into the distance.

There's a horrified gasp down the hallway, and then an angry shout as Swansea rushes in and roars, "What did you DO? He's—He's fucking BLEEDING OUT, JIMMY!

You useless piece of shit, how could you—"

Daisuke blacks out.

When he wakes up, the entire room is bathed in red light. There's just so much pain that he can't even think or be aware of his surroundings. He honestly wishes he'd rather have died in the initial crash, blown up or drifting in space.

He's been forced to lay down in the main room on a mattress with attempts to stop the bleeding. Judging by the burns on his body, and the fact that they no longer have Nurse Anya with them, Daisuke would have to guess that it's not going well. He just can't—he can't FEEL ANYTHING—

"I'm s-sorry," Daisuke chokes out, writhing around in agony. He hears the discussion of disinfectant and knows that it's been used in the cocktail, doing his best to not cry harder at the thought of disappointing Swansea again.

"THE COCKTAIL?" Swansea roars, and Daisuke goes under again for a bit.

When he comes to, Jimmy's standing over him with a bottle of Mouthwashing. "I'm so...rry...I messed...up..." Daisuke tries to say, spit and drool dripping down the side of his mouth.

"Don't try to talk." Jimmy orders. With nearly no hesitation, he pours the bottle directly into his wounds. Daisuke's vision whites out; he screams and wails and sobs, choking on saliva, and feeling his body burn so badly he thinks he's going to die.

He comes to and fades out again over the course of two hours, feeling somehow *worse* when he finally wakes up and stares at the ceiling, vision going gray and black at the edges.

"The bleeding won't stop," Jimmy whispers, barely moving as he looks directly at him. "Just try to stay still, Daisuke. I–I need a second to think. We can fix this."

"Hey, kid? You hear me?" Swansea asks in a soft tone that Daisuke didn't think was possible. "Daisuke?"

He can't move; he can't even talk anymore. His tongue feels heavy. Something arcs through his body and makes his muscles spasm again, forcing Daisuke to jerk around and feel an aftermath pang of agony.

"Hey, stop! Stop already! Don't move!" Jimmy snaps, sounding more stressed than anything. Daisuke has a feeling it's not really about him anymore, and simply chooses to look over at Swansea, who's getting a better grip on the handle. If Daisuke was able to focus, he would see how white Swansea's knuckles are.

"It's alright, Daisuke. Calm down." Swansea murmurs, shifting around him. "This line of work. You could never have become like miserable ol' Swansea. What a tragedy," he says bitterly. "Decades of hauling ass for Pony Express, big mighty bruiser with all his shiny tools. This is where it got me. The good life, huh?"

Moments of their lives on the *Tulpar* over the past few months are starting to flash in Daisuke's cloudy eyes. Making Curly's birthday cake, the board game nights they had to postpone every few days because Anya kept on shoving game pieces over when she lost, and even spending time with Swansea, listening to his stories about life and his family and chiming in with his own dumb anecdotes.

"I thought you were dumber than a can of paint, always just chewing my ear off about nothing," Swansea continues, clenching his jaw and looking away briefly. His hands are shaking.

Daisuke faintly hears above him, in a choked up voice, "Useless ray of goddamn sunshine. Not an ace student, career workhouse or force of ambition."

It's true, he doesn't have a lot going for him anymore, but...no one's...no one's been that kind to him in a very long time. Daisuke can't really remember the last time his mom called him sunshine. He can't really remember anything, actually. The pain's going away. He's feeling better than he did several minutes ago.

"Just a damn good kid trying his best. You coulda taught an old fool like me a lot," Swansea whispers, sounding distraught. He's in tears over *Daisuke,* not even his family that he's left behind in this endless voyage through space. He's upset over losing his reckless intern, doomed to never step foot into the cryopod that Swansea diligently took care of for months just for an ounce of hope that the kid he considers his child would make it home.

Made him proud, Daisuke thinks. *I did something good for once in my life.* The world fades in and out of existence, going gray and fuzzy at the edges and spreads in.

"Close your eyes, Daisuke."

He dutifully closes his eyes, imagining that in another world, he's someone that others want to be friends with. He's followed orders, he's made the crew proud of him, they're going to have one more game night together. One more birthday party on the Tulpar, celebrating with cake.

I hope this hurts.

Above him, the axe swings.

EMERGENCY
EMERGENCY
EMERGENCY
EMERGENCY
EMERGENCY
EMERGENCY

PONY EXPRESS
PRETTYPEY 2025

Spudie says,
“ Tonight ”

Rot sinks through the crevices, and cracks, of her skin
Yet she tries to yank it away like the origin of sin
She pull and pluck at it—trying to break it down bit by bit
Forcing out blood and bile
Pinching her skin—and wonder if it's still flesh and bone

Besmirch her name and take it through the mud
Cross it out and rewrite history
Spin a tale of anguish and woe—
Leaving her in the footnotes, six feet below
Broken goods, eaten words
Shaking hands, clammy palms
Bitten nails, stomach aches
Steeling her burning resolve:
I told you in the only way I could,
But it seems that actions speak louder than words.

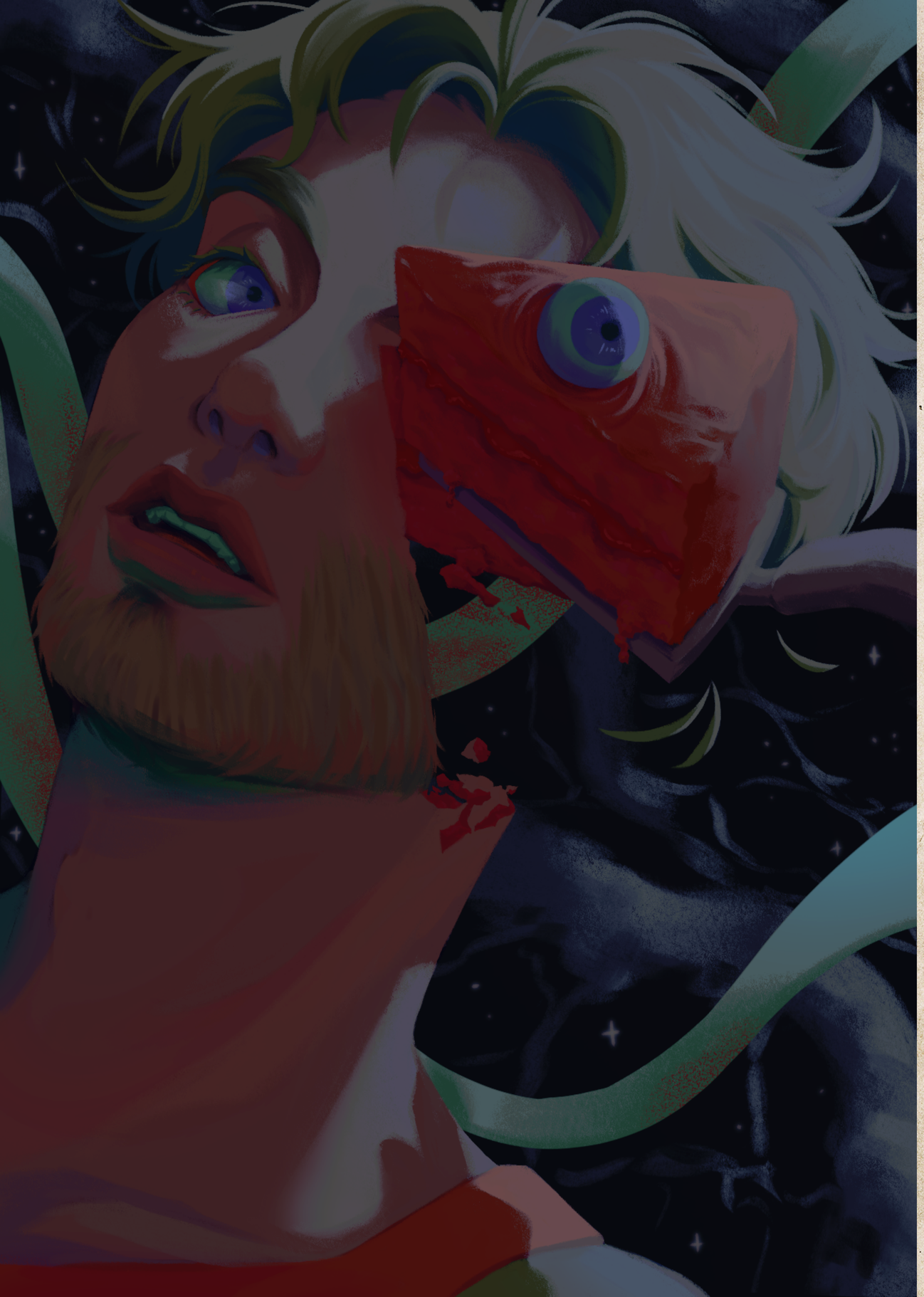
Hope dwindles with the pounding of her chest
Closing her eyes while the sugar pills do the rest
Last thing being captains call unaddressed
Your fault, it never was—
You’ve always known that.

But cuts in her fingers throb to the sound of her heart
Shedding tears of gold over the porcelain pieces
Praying her sorrow will mend the broken parts
It’s a routine she plays with herself every night
Tonight, something is different
Her heart winds up tight
Trying to leap out of her throat
But the words burn and press around her neck

She shatters every night, with dignity, and with pride
And each night slowly but surely, she pieces herself back together
Ready to face another day—
Another relapse—
Another cause for concern—

MAYA
RAE
真弥麗
LIMBSTOWINGS

Voices Lost In Space



Kiichu says,
“ Life of the Party ”

The perpetual artificial sunset, splintered with spider web-like cracks from an axe, has long lost its visual appeal, yet Jimmy sometimes takes pause to glance at it. Occasionally, he finds himself entranced by the orange and red hues, the burning shades calling out, begging to set him aflame like the captain before him.

On that very special day—the *last* day—it speaks to him directly, further attempting to immortalize him.

“Let us celebrate,” it whispers, its voice sounding a lot like Polle’s. “*You deserve it, for all you’ve done.*”

He doesn’t know why the tone is so cold, as if trying to place the blame entirely on his shoulders, but that kind of accusatory bullshit is easy to ignore. It always has been. Despite the sour implications behind the words, the overall message can’t be denied:

A celebration *is* in order.

The memory of the last party on this ship leaves a bitter, foul taste in his mouth like stomach bile. Though it had been just a formality of Pony Express, Jimmy could honestly say he enjoyed setting it all up for his friend. It was a stupid reason—he saw no purpose in forcing those sorts of formalities upon the crew—but he still tried to make the best of it with the rest of them. However, that harsh bomb of reality dropped by Curly in the middle of the celebration set off everything, putting into motion the events that brought them to this very moment. Everything had stemmed from that one cruel reminder of their insignificance.

Ironic, also, how Curly was the only one the company had been willing to support in the transition period—and now look at him. He’s no longer their golden pony, lying in agony in an infirmary bed because no one had the heart to finish what the explosion started. Jimmy’s had to pick up the slack since the captain’s incapacitation, and what has that earned him? Certainly not praise from his skeleton crew, nor a letter from the higher-ups promising to help his career. It’s almost absurd to think, at this stage, that he’d receive *anything* as recognition. In this quiet spot in space, he’s forgotten, forced to die slowly and painfully with no one even knowing about it!

It’s like he tried to tell Curly—they could’ve burned out like stars, brightly and beautifully. The Tulpar could’ve been the Titanic in space, bringing a fresh and unavoidable tragedy written about for decades to come.

And maybe it's not too late.

Maybe what this eerily denouncing voice in his head is proposing *can* save them, after all.

*"A party, just for Captain Jimmy. A **real** one,"* it says. *"One last hurrah for the hero."*

He undoubtedly deserves it, but does he have enough time and resources? By their very nature, parties need guests first and foremost, and then there's decorations and food...

"Jimmmmmy..." A low groan snaps Jimmy to attention. Tearing his eyes away from the screen, he follows the sound to the corner of the lounge.

Ah. There's the first guest, then.

Daisuke's face hasn't changed since Jimmy last saw him: flesh split in half, parts of his skull warped from the axe's trauma, and one of his eyes a milky white. There's deep red tracks down his cheekbones, looking almost like tears—but despite looking so utterly *unhappy*, the kid's tone is as relaxed and jolly as ever.

"Hey, sorry! Did I spook you? Just playing around." He tries to meet his captain's gaze, but the iris-intact eye keeps straying lazily off to the side. *"You looking for partygoers? 'Cause I'm a party king, dude! So, can I come? Pleeeeeease?"*

That always-irritating youthful edge to his voice, not to mention the immature way of drawing out words, violently grinds into Jimmy's nerves. Instead of answering directly, Jimmy bends down to start hoisting the kid up onto his back. Daisuke's arms, ridden with electrical burns and rust-filled lacerations, droop over Jimmy's shoulders. His entire mangled body goes limp to make himself that much harder to carry.

There's a childish air in his tone as he speaks unprompted *again*. *"Do you like parties, Cap?"*

Jimmy grunts. "...Not really."

Well, to be more precise, he's never had a *reason* to like them. Sure, he'd had a *few* thrown for him in his lifetime; his childhood and adolescence brought some lackluster birthdays, complete with no friends and cake as bland as the actual event, but they've never felt *real*. He's never felt...*worthy*. A voice in the back of his mind always sits like a nagging bitch in his ear, taking every chance to remind him he doesn't deserve whatever he's trying to celebrate.

Over the years, that voice of doubt only grew louder and more vicious—less of an insecurity, more of a predator waiting in the shadows. It gnawed at him like hunger, bringing a deep sensation akin to grief regarding what he's constantly been denied.

Daisuke's voice returns him to reality again. *"Hey, right next to you! Thanks! I feel important."*

Blinking in confusion, Jimmy notes that he did, in fact, seat the kid beside him—but, that hadn't really been a conscious choice. He'll have to be more deliberate with the rest of the guests. Curly will have to have the best seat—apart from Jimmy's, of course.

Without another word, Jimmy turns to grab his next guest, eager to fill the table.

In that cold room, the old man's face looks sunken in and even more wrinkled than usual, a gaping hole across one of his eyes matching another dead-center on his forehead. There's stains all over his face and shirt, the stench of copper mixed with mint permeating the air. Pathetically slumped in the chair he's been left in, he tries to ignore Jimmy as the younger man approaches. Swansea's always had a history of being difficult, and clearly he intends to continue that even now.

"Don't touch me, asshole," he hisses. *"I don't want your filthy hands on me."*

Grimacing, Jimmy tries to grab at Swansea and pull him out of the chair, but his damp clothes stick to the seat. He doesn't even struggle as he's yanked around, instead just huffing in annoyance and going as limp as Daisuke had.

*"You think you can just come in here and tell me what to do—like you've **earned** the right to be my captain? You're nothing but a fraud, Jimbo."* Swansea's bloodied lips are curled to a smirk, but his voice is void of humor and his stare deadly serious.

Jimmy bites back a retort, instead gripping the legs of the chair and giving a shove, beginning their long journey back to the lounge.

Swansea's voice is almost as grating at the chair's legs screeching against the floor. *"You're throwin' yourself a party, eh? That's the dumbest shit I've ever heard. What makes you so goddamn special? Did you forget you're the one who* fucked us all over ***completely**?"*

"...Shut up," Jimmy mutters. His efforts, while flawed, were done for a particular reason, and he's tried his damndest to fix what he can. Isn't that what life's all about, anyway—becoming a better person than you were yesterday? Even the tiniest of steps

are progress, and Jimmy's not about to let the man who ruined his entire sobriety streak for *mouthwash* make him doubt himself.

Besides...there's really no choice here. Jimmy's efforts *have* to matter.

It *has* to all mean something, so he *has* to throw this party for himself—because the alternative would be unthinkable. If it's all been for nothing, if he hasn't done enough to salvage what he can of this mess, still attempting to paint himself and Curly as heroes and the rest of the crew as courageous casualties...

If all his efforts had been in *vain*...

No. They're not. He shakes his head clear of any hesitation. It's just Swansea, trying to get a rise out of him like he always does.

"Almost got me there," Jimmy sneers.

Swansea chuckles, his face melting into a detached sort of amusement. *"Almost,"* he agrees.

Including the nurse is a last-minute decision—one Jimmy literally *stumbles* into. On the way to grab Curly, he trips over her, cursing under his breath.

"Sorry, Jim," she mumbles through stained lips. Wilted against the partition near the medical cot, her head's turned towards Jimmy, and she looks as meek and pathetic as ever. Her uniform is as messy as the others', its mixture of dark splotches only showcasing childlike sloppiness. *"Will you...let me come to the party, too?"*

Jimmy *does* deserve as many people at his party as possible, especially after just dealing with Swansea's attitude. While Anya hasn't really done anything to *earn* being there, he's not exactly spoiled for choice here. He'll have to settle.

Crouching, he reaches to get her on his back like Daisuke, but she shakes her head.

"You can't carry me," she murmurs, her arms crossed over her middle and her sad, glazed-over eyes trailing downwards. *"I'm too heavy."*

He doesn't follow her gaze; instead, he just grabs her legs and drags, because that's the best he can do.

"Thank you," she breathes, her tone gentle. *"I knew I could count on you to help me."*

There's only one chair left, next to Jimmy, and he decides she can sit there. She didn't do enough to help Curly, to do her *job* correctly, but there's no sense in getting angry now; he shouldn't bring down the mood at his own party.

With his guests now positioned in their chairs, Jimmy next decides to focus on the atmosphere. The lounge hasn't changed much in months, its foamy and chaotic state only growing worse as time slowly dragged on. It'll be good for bringing up morale, at least for himself, if he adds a bit more color to this dark, red eyesore of a room.

They still have the banners and balloons from the last party, and though it pains Jimmy to use assets not meant for him, he'll have to deal with it. At least they can be repurposed for something more meaningful, something *significant*—not a shallow corporate-issued celebration with crappy cake and fake-ass platitudes.

The crew watches him decorate the lounge. They can't get out of their seats to help him, but that doesn't stop them from commenting on his work—much to his chagrin.

"Little more to the left, Jimbo," the old drunk crows as Jimmy hangs up a banner above their heads. *"And for fuck's sake, pop some of those green balloons. They're an eyesore."*

"I think they help balance some of the red," Anya comments thoughtfully. *"For what it's worth, I think you're doing well, Jim. It doesn't look easy to do alone."* She's right—it's painstakingly slow to set up all this shit by himself, the four of them having divided up the work last time.

"Yeah, for sure!" Daisuke cheers. *"But man, I'm getting bored. Are we about ready to get this thing started?"*

Jimmy nods. "There's just one more thing to do."

"Well hurry it up!" Swansea grouses. *"You know we don't have all day!"*

Isn't *that* the truth? Jimmy knows his judgment is rapidly approaching, can *feel* it looming heavily over his head like a storm cloud. If he continues wasting time, he won't get much time to relish in his reward.

But *this* isn't a waste of time—far from it.

"This is important," he promises, hurrying back to the infirmary.

The captain still lies pathetically on the cot, gasping against pain despite the pills

Jimmy keeps feeding him. Ungrateful as always for everything his friend does, he writhes as though trying to escape the only person on this ship that cares enough to help him.

That thin medical gown smells rancid, coated with God-knows-how-old dried vomit and blood - not to mention the raw, reddened meat peeking out of any holes in the papery material. The only proof that it's Curly at all is his eye—that *fucking* wide, bloodshot blue eye that has never stopped *staring*.

Jimmy cocks a smirk. "Not wearing anything fancy to the party, eh?"

Strange that it didn't occur to him until now that he's not properly dressed himself—fucking *coveralls* and a long-sleeve shirt are not really fitting for the celebration and subsequent judgment—but his room's blocked by foam, so he finds himself once again without options.

"Guess I'll follow your lead—everyone always accused me of that, anyway."

The ex-captain can't even blink as Jimmy lifts him—gently, because he'd never want to *hurt* Curly for no reason. Moans escape his bared bloody teeth, the viscera of his chest under the gown rising and falling rapidly in panic.

"Relax. It's just me," he assures his friend. "I'm gonna take care of things. First, we'll have one last hurrah, and it'll be genuine. Nothing like our company's bullshit, I promise. Just everyone having a good time, that's what you wanted, isn't it?"

With this celebration, they can all be together one last time, Curly won't suffer anymore, and Jimmy will finally be given what he's always craved.

Everyone wins.

After settling Curly down on top of the table, Jimmy seats himself at the head chair.

His throat tightens as he looks around the room, meaningfully gazing at each of his crew members. Memories of their time together on this unforgettable trip flow through him, an ache pulling at his chest. The nostalgia is bitter in his mouth, tainted slightly sweet by the smiles he sees around the table.

Goodbyes have never been difficult for him - it's usually so easy to cut and run when he's ready to leave—but here, he finds himself frozen, snared between what he wants to do and what he *has* to. There's only one ending here, one last chapter for the Tulpar's story; Jimmy's the one left penning it, and he won't make anymore mistakes.

He did his best, trying to fix what he could along the way. Yes, things kept unraveling, but he hopes they know he *tried*.

And in the end, isn't that all that anyone could ask of a captain? Of a *man*?

"Hear, hear! Captain Jimmy!"
The cheers are invigorating, reminding Jimmy of why he set this whole party up in the first place and giving him the strength to see it through to the end.

"Speech! Give us a speech!"

Time's almost run out on them, but there's one last element Jimmy hasn't forgotten. It wouldn't be a satisfactory party without *cake*, now would it?

He grips the knife, squeezing it so tightly his hand shakes. Lost for a moment as he watches the way the blade reflects the cracked sunset's light, he absentmindedly lets the tip glide across his fingertips. Blood bubbles up in thin lines, trickling down to his palm, but it doesn't hurt.

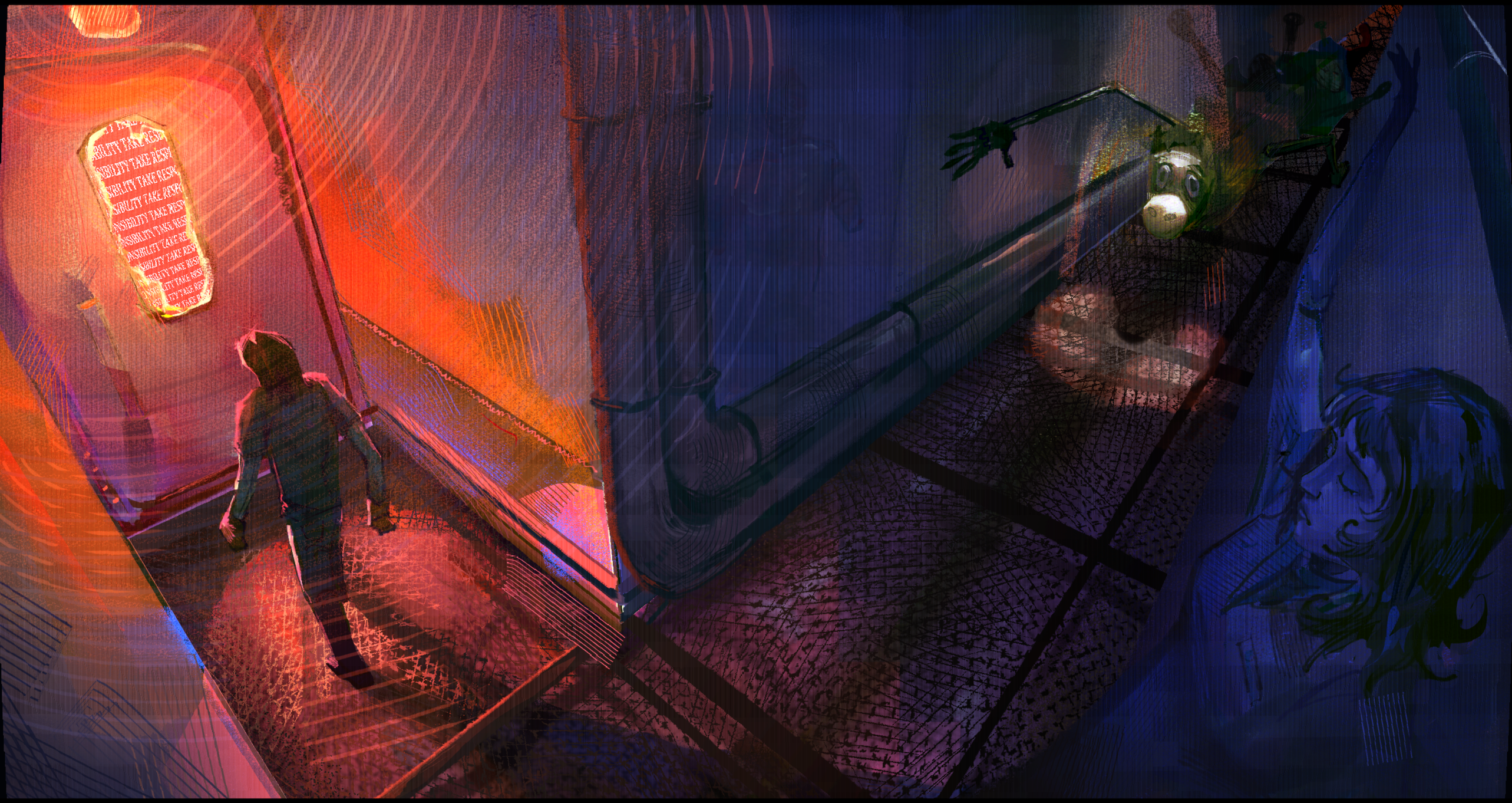
Nothing hurts.

Curly stares up at him from the table's surface, that eye never leaving him. If Jimmy looks really, really closely, he can see a glimpse of reverence underneath the fear.

Even now, unable to speak, Curly believes in him. In his final hour, Jimmy feels the satiation of a job well done, of a party ending on an exceptionally high note.

Nothing left to do now but eat cake with his friend.

And then, an afterparty to *die* for.


YOU CAN RUN BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE
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Polle says: "You reap what you sow!"

GRAB

CONCLAVE

Written by: Leo M
Illustrations by: Omagpies

Servant

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.

Spoken language failed to articulate the raw desperation that roiled within Jimmy's abdomen— the sick churn of his stomach and the surge of adrenaline tightening his chest bore witness to that. He fought his body to remain present as the moments passed, his slow blinking and carefully maneuvered breaths taking most of his attention. If he swallowed too frequently, bile would rise and burn at the back of his throat, only to be forced back into his stomach with the nod of his head. The sight of Curly was jarring to say the least, but Jimmy had begun to marvel at the charred polygons that broke and crumbled to the cot beside him. It was impactful, thought provoking and somewhat perverse in nature, warping Jimmy's concept of reality as if he may grow to prefer the company of Curly's fetid rot. He had proven it far more meaningful than literature could convey, requiring the smell turn to taste to capture its significance. How fitting it was to see him torn apart, skin sloughing, still himself and yet someone—or something else entirely. Unashamed and irreparable. Jimmy once pondered to himself on late nights wondering what lay beneath his exterior, and now he knew. Not golden plated or spectacularly composed, but the same red and black hues one would expect when cracking open the ribcage of a slain rabbit.

Significance and insignificance—both of which became calories for greater, stronger beings.

A once fearless leader, now a pile of necrotic tissue fusing with the porous fabric of his hospital gown. Jimmy had always seen the luminous halo of divinity just behind Curly's head, dusting the tips of his blonde hair in a white glow. A folded hand, a medallion of his own face, a flame graciously flickering above his crown. He lacked the title alone. It was odd, all things considered, that even now it had not dimmed. If anything, its vibrance intensified.

The push of blood through Curly's arteries droned on like the rhythmic pulse of a metronome, mimicking the thwack of his heart against his sternum. 100, maybe 115 beats per minute. Jimmy grew weary of counting. He'd assisted in his care just long enough to establish his vested interest in his well being. Nothing more.

Veneration

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

Curly was always exceptional in his own right. Socially, privately, interpersonally, he was quite a sight to behold. If anyone was capable of holiness, it would most certainly be him, and for many reasons. The most important of which was his desire to be good, or to do good, and in the face of adversity, Curly was the decider between that and a more regrettable option. To do what one can, to not do too much, to mediate and compromise does not a good person make... and yet, there he once stood; a great presence, a good friend, and a decent enough leader. Jimmy thought he knew what made a man, but his understanding had since changed.

When Jimmy was a young boy, his father held before him two paths, the strength and fortitude of a leader, or the subservience and submission of a follower. Be it life or his own tendency to bow his head away from accountability, he more naturally followed the lead of someone responsible for his actions. Curly was that person effortlessly, albeit his resentment likely soured the liturgical chalice they shared. Jimmy folded into his arms under the shadow of his dear captain when faced with scrutiny, and never once was he grateful for it. He wasn't even entirely certain he would come to Curly's defense if ever needed—not like Curly did for him. If that made him wicked, he supposed he could accept it. He'd certainly been called worse.

Still, Curly stood between him and what felt like the galaxy, a loyal protector of honor and justice without the wherewithal to distinguish right from wrong. Jimmy had always assumed it was idealistic in practice but *no,* not anymore. It was blind devotion, respect, and trust where none was deserved. Curly's belief in the good of humanity made him a man worthy of reverence, yet an ignorant man all the same. If time had turned back—if a second chance was bestowed upon him—Jimmy was sure he'd walk a similar path knowing the consequences; that point alone a reminder of his inability

to control himself. He'd noted the thick line set before him and stepped over it many times, dividing fault between the line itself and the person who kept drawing new ones when he'd ignored the last.

It didn't matter much now, he supposed. None of it did, and maybe, it never had. The will to live was strong, but never greater than the dread of dying. Jimmy had never once stopped to question his mortality until the truth of it became evident; he had damned himself for the sake of his freedom not only in the eyes of his crewmates, but under the gaze of *God* himself. Passed the heavens, wherever their creator may rest, creatures resembling discs with eyes deliberate lengths between another peeked from around dark corners, the corners of his eyes, and some loomed behind his skull. They watched, irises following every move while they lay in wait to report to their deity of origin. Jimmy had never seen them, but their many eyes had witnessed his greatness, or lack thereof.

The *Tulpar*, when recovered, would be stillborn, disconnected from the life sustaining flesh of its temporary organ. Its flesh never to be expelled, but instead to rot from within. The tree of life decomposing to poison the very being it was meant to protect was an irony Jimmy couldn't bear, and yet, he continued to parse through those very thoughts simply because there wasn't much to do otherwise.

It had been quite some time since he felt the presence of another person, at least one that he hadn't compiled in an illusory stupor. Anything seemed better than dwelling on the putrescine eviscerating the inner lining of his nostrils, or the naphtha evolving his palate.

Blessed

The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done.

The loud shriek of metal paneling under the pressure could barely withstand their atmosphere, and Jimmy grew concerned with its resound. Where it was once a dull hum, masked by insulation and thick carbon fiber, now there was only panging, rolling, and creaking that filled the empty space between bodies. Its presence added to the symphony of misery that plagued him, and he'd unintentionally laid waste to himself all the same. The weight of his eyelids seemed to multiply by the day, struggling to cooperate in his worst moments. His body, stubbornly trudging on, clung to whatever stored fat was left between the divots of his ribcage. That bone so graciously protecting the heart beneath would be his brains next target in hopes of sustaining vital function. These minor aches and pains were a reminder that whatever was next was approaching far more quickly than he'd thought.

He had begun to think of the *Tulpar* as a final resting place—or more accurately the chapel harboring his funeral service. Curly's medical cot served as the altar and the sunset screen their iconostasis, those warm yellow accents and old brush strokes were works of art, much like Jimmy's resentful recognition of Curly's creation. Whatever higher power reigning over them looked down upon Curly, his even-handed heart brimming with admiration.

Curly's survival was nothing short of a miracle—a particularly irritating acknowledgement of his resilience despite misfortune. Jimmy didn't know much about pathology, but what he did know proved time was but a luxury good with a hefty price. Curly's body was pleading for death, and yet his chest continued to rise and fall. There was no way a normal person could live in such a simplistic castle of meat and bone. His consciousness, though debatable at times, was proof enough of his sanctitude. It exhibited beyond a doubt that Curly was far more hallowed than an untrained eye would see. No unconsecrated man could live long enough to see his body feasted upon, not even the friends who admired his greatness could have accepted the simple fact of him being no mere man at all.

Even then, Jimmy was stationed in front of a full plate and surrounded by believers, it was nothing more than a senseless siege. If Curly had offered his flesh of his own volition, it would have been more impactful. Perhaps Jimmy was proud to be that mouthpiece in the meanwhile, or maybe Curly's influence had made him worthy of doing so; which was the truth, Jimmy would never know.

His own judgement would come in due time. He pictured himself knelt on the prie-dieu with a gun at the nape of his neck, voice ripping up through his vocal cords as he recited his own obituary—a deranged elegy for pain and loss and inadequacy. But not Curly, no. Pews would be filled and royals would be present to witness such a service. Jimmy himself would have been in the front row, time permitting, wailing amongst the criers but not quite sure if his performative action would pull sympathy from other mourners.

Curly being deserving of his sainthood was of some importance to him, or so he thought; judgement from an upstanding man to he who was undeserving rendered Jimmy's worst moments a malignant tumor only experienced equipment could locate. Its presence proved asymptomatic, but fatal just the same. Curly's power, though blatant, was inexplicable—a miracle only proven by the crackle of his lungs on exhale and the desperate inhale to follow. His physical being was both heroic virtue and a symbol of resilience. The crew's initial survival was a testament to that. If Jimmy thought too deeply, it might drive him mad.

Canonization

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

There was thickness in the air now. A concentrated mix of hydrogen sulfide, biological matter, and ammonia one might expect from a derelict churchyard. Death and decay surrounded him, and there was no peace to be found. The weight of Curly in his arms was heavy with grief, regret, and oddly, relief; not for himself but for Curly, who in the end proved a better man than he could ever be. Placing Curly upon his throne—accepting his right to judge and govern—was not a decision made lightly. Jimmy had parsed through his thoughts time and time again, committed to his cause regardless of the consequences.

For this was, ultimately, his final judgement.

Effort was entirely absent, no thought conjured to avoid the grave Jimmy had steadily dug himself until he was faced with its depth. He assumed he wouldn't understand the veracity of his judgement when it came. Good and evil, whichever humans are inherently, he was certain there was more darkness within him than he or anyone realized. Perhaps it had been festering for years—long before the steady electric hum of the *Tulpar*, or maybe at conception he was doomed to be outcast. He groveled in the presence of the cavern with his hands pressed palm to palm, only folding his fingers together when the heel of an proverbial boot dug between his shoulder blades. He pictured the crepitation of dirt filled lungs, the skitter of rodents and the looping gait of maggots reclaiming the biological matter they were owed. If he believed, really and truly so, the blood he shed would not outweigh the blood that protected his sins.

Suicide was not unforgivable; it is the mark of a sacrifice—the martyr—and Jimmy could accept that responsibility.

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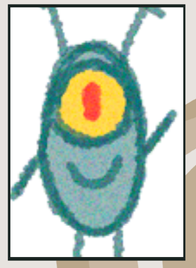

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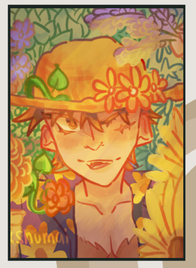

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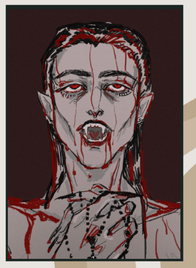

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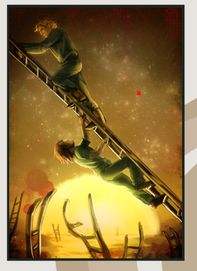

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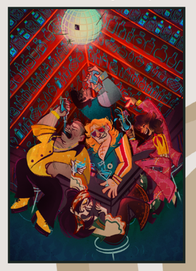

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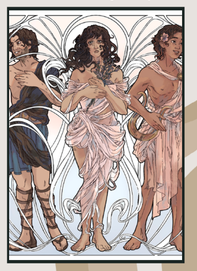

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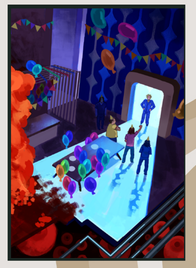

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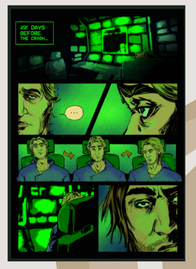

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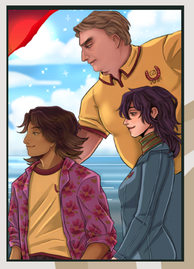

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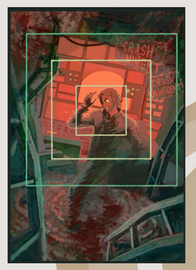

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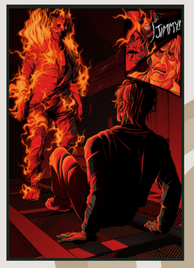

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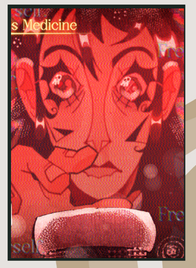

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Sheldon

Tumblr wakokakoa
Twitter wakokakoa

PASS Pony Express

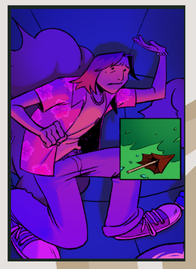
EMPLOYEE CARD

Name
Lad

Tumblr lmnlad
Twitter lmnlad

PASS Pony Express

EMPLOYEE CARD



Name
Oranedgp

oranedgp.carrd.co

PASS Pony Express

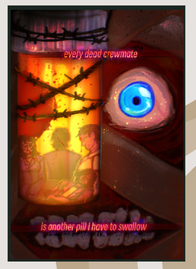
EMPLOYEE CARD

Name
Astro

Tumblr astronomalyy

PASS Pony Express

EMPLOYEE CARD



Name
Miniyuna

Twitter TheMiniyuna

PASS Pony Express

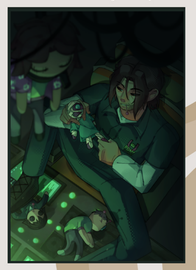
EMPLOYEE CARD

Name
Eggtraoli

Eggtraoli.carrd.co

PASS Pony Express

EMPLOYEE CARD



Name
itsnicsalad

Instagram itsnicsalad

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
Vanya

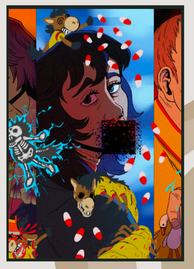
Tumblr vnynv
Twitter malyuvny

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
Pon

Tumblr ponpox
Bluesky ponpox

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**



Name
Pretty Fly For A Shy Guy

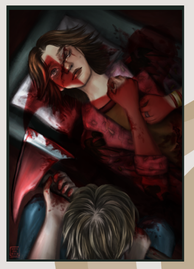
Tumblr prettyflyshyguy
Instagram prettyflyshyguy

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
Lulu

Tumblr lulady030

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**



Name
Limbs To Wings

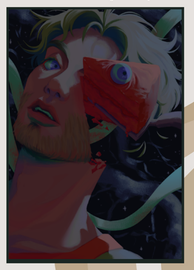
Tumblr limbstowings
Instagram limbstowings
Twitter limbstowings

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
Chacha

Instagram dashapiteau

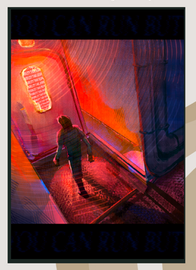
PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**



Name
chookatten

Bluesky ChooKatten
Instagram ChooKatten
Twitter ChooKatten

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**



Name
2bencats

Twitter 2bencats
Instagram 2bencats

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
planets

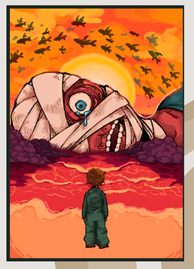
Tumblr planetsandmagic
Bluesky planetsandmagic
Twitter planetsandmagic

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
Naira Ivory

Twitter nairaivory

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**



Name
deltamiyo

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
Shea

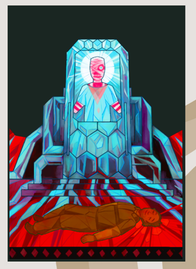
Tumblr herdingflowers
Bluesky mcasowl

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
Sheldon

Tumblr wakokakoa
Twitter wakokakoa

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**



Name
Omagpies

Tumblr omagpies
AO3 MagpieCrown
YouTube magpiecrown9202

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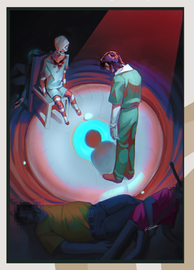

Name
CONNOR

Tumblr cosmic-nopedog
Bluesky nopedog
Twitter Nopedog_

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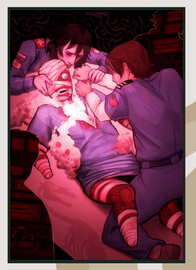
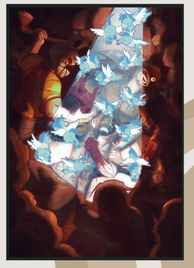


Name
Omagpies

Tumblr omagpies
AO3 MagpieCrown
YouTube magpiecrown9202

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**



Name
Moon

Tumblr thelostmoongazer
Twitch thelostmoongazer_
Twitter omelettecandy

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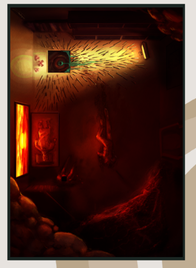

Name
_illusTrance

Tumblr illustrance
Instagram _illustrance
Twitter _illustrance

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
H_Surjus

Tumblr h-surjus
Bluesky h-surjus

WRITERS

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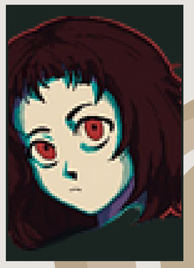

Name
papernautilus

AO3 papernautilus
Bluesky papernautilus
papernautilus.strawpage

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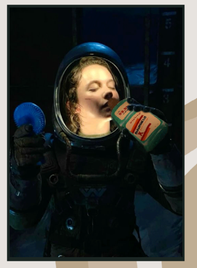

Name
SATURNO

Tumblr amanece-parabellum
AO3 amaneceparabellum
Twitter ofowlsandtitans

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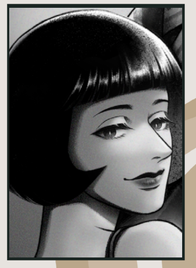

Name
Myst

Tumblr myssterioustranger
AO3 mysterioustranger
Bluesky myssterioustranger

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Name
Starry

Tumblr starryroyalty
AO3 starryroyalty
starryroyalty.carrd.co

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
Spudie

Instagram Princess_Spud

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
Kiichu

AO3 Kiichu

PASS Pony Express **EMPLOYEE CARD**

Name
Leo M.

Tumblr Postcrashcurly
AO3 Heartilation

THANK YOU

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